



A CASE OF PREMEDITATION

BY

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MR. RUFUS PEMBURY was not pleased when, as the train was about to move out of Maidstone (East) Station, a coarse and burly man (clearly a denizen of the third class) was ushered into his compartment by the guard. His resentment deepened as the stranger sat down and fixed upon Mr. Pembury a gaze of impertinent intensity.

Mr. Pembury fidgeted in his seat, looked into his pocket-book, and even thought of opening his umbrella. Finally he turned to the stranger with frosty remonstrance:

"I imagine, sir, that you will have no difficulty in recognizing me, should we ever meet again — which God forbid."

"I should reckonize you among ten thousand," was the reply, so unexpected as to leave Mr. Pembury speechless.

"You see," the stranger continued impressively, "I've got the gift of faces. I never forget."

"That must be a great consolation," said Pembury.

"It's very useful to me," said the stranger; "at least, it used to be, when I was a warder at Portland. You remember me, I dare say. My name is Pratt. I was assistant warder in your time. God-forsaken hole, Portland!"

Pembury pulled himself together.

"I think," said he, "you must be mistaking me for some one else."

"I don't," replied Pratt. "You're Francis

Dobbs. Slipped away from Portland one evening about twelve years ago. Clothes washed up on the Bill next day. As neat a mizzle as ever I heard of. But there are a couple of photographs and a set of finger-prints at the Habitual Criminals Register. P'r'aps you'd like to come and see 'em?"

"Why should I go to the Habitual Criminals Register?" Pembury demanded faintly.

"Ah! Exactly. Why should you?—when you are a man of means and a little judiciously invested capital would render it unnecessary."

Pembury looked out of the window, and for a minute or more preserved a stony silence. At length he turned to Pratt. "How much?"

"I shouldn't think a couple of hundred a year would hurt you," was the calm reply.

Pembury reflected. "What makes you think I am a man of means?" he asked presently.

Pratt smiled grimly. "Bless you, Mr. Pembury," said he, "I know all about you. Why, for the last six months I have been living within half a mile of your house."

"The devil you have!"

"Yes. When I retired from the service, General O'Gorman engaged me as care-taker of his place at Baysford, and the very day after I came down I met you, but, naturally, I kept out of sight. Thought I'd find out whether you were good for anything before I spoke, so I've been keeping my ears open, and I find you are good for a couple of hundred."

There was an interval of silence, and then the ex-warder resumed:

"That's what comes of having a memory for faces. Now, there's Jack Ellis, on the other hand. He must have had you under his nose for a couple of years, and yet he's never twigged—he never will, either," added Pratt, already regretting the confidence into which his vanity had led him.

"Who is Jack Ellis?" Pembury demanded.

"Why, he's a sort of supernum'ary at the Baysford police station. He was in the Civil Guard at Portland in your time, but he got his left forefinger chopped off, so they pensioned him, and he got this billet. But he'll never reckernize you."

"Who is this General O'Gorman? I seem to know the name."

"I expect you do," said Pratt. "He was governor of Dartmoor when I was there, and, let me tell you, if he'd been at Portland in your time, you'd never have got away. The General is a great man on bloodhounds. He kept a pack at Dartmoor, and there were no attempted escapes in those days."

"Has he the pack still?" asked Pembury.

"Rather. He's always hoping there'll be a

burglary or a murder in the neighborhood, so as he can try 'em. But, to come back to our little arrangement, what do you say to a couple of hundred, paid quarterly, if you like?"

"I can't settle the matter offhand," said Pembury. "You must give me time to think it over."

"Very well," said Pratt. "I shall be back at Baysford to-morrow. Shall I look in at your place to-morrow night?"

"No," replied Pembury; "you'd better not be seen at my house, nor I at yours. If I meet you at some quiet spot, we can settle our business without any one knowing that we have met. It won't take long, and we can't be too careful."

"That's true," agreed Pratt. "Well, I'll tell you what. There's an avenue leading up to our house—you know it, I expect. The gates are always ajar, excepting at night. Now, I'll be down by the six thirty at Baysford. Our place is a quarter of an hour from the station. Say you meet me in the avenue at a quarter to seven. How will that do?"

"That will suit me," answered Pembury.

"Hallo!" said Pratt, suddenly. "This'll be Swanley, I expect. So long. To-morrow evening, in the avenue, at a quarter to seven."

"Very well," said Mr. Pembury. He spoke coldly enough, but there was a flush on his cheeks and an angry light in his eyes, which, perhaps, the ex-warder noticed; for, when he had stepped out and shut the door, he thrust his head in at the window and said threateningly:

"One more word, Mr. Pembury-Dobbs. No hanky-panky, you know. I'm an old hand, and pretty fly, I am. So don't you try any chickery-pokery on me. That's all!"

He withdrew his head and disappeared, leaving Pembury to his reflections.

Rufus Pembury, to give him his real name, was a man of strong character and intelligence. So much so that, having tried the criminal career and found it not worth pursuing, he had definitely abandoned it. When the cattle-boat that had picked him up off Portland Bill landed him at an American port, he brought all his ability and energy to bear on legitimate commercial pursuits, with such success that at the end of ten years he was able to return to England with a moderate competence. Then he had taken a modest house near the little town of Baysford, and here he might have lived out the rest of his life in peace but for the unlucky chance that brought Pratt into the neighborhood.

There is something eminently unsatisfactory about a blackmailer. No arrangement with him has any permanent validity. The thing that he has sold remains in his possession to sell over again. He pockets the price of emancipation,

but retains the key of the fetters. In short, the blackmailer is a totally impossible person.

Such were Rufus Pembury's reflections, even while Pratt was making his proposals, which he had never for an instant entertained. Pratt must be eliminated: it was a logical consequence. The profound meditations, therefore, in which Pembury remained immersed for the remainder of the journey had nothing whatever to do with the quarterly allowance; they were concerned exclusively with the elimination of ex-warder Pratt.

When Pembury alighted at Charing Cross, he directed his steps toward a quiet private hotel. The woman manager greeted him by his name as she handed him his key. "Are you staying in town, Mr. Pembury?" she asked.

"No," was the reply; "I go back to-morrow morning. But I may be coming up again shortly. By the way, you used to have an Encyclopædia. Could I see it for a moment?"

That a gentleman from the country should desire to look up the subject of *hounds* would not, to a casual observer, have seemed unnatural. But when from *hounds* he proceeded to the article on *blood*, and thence to one devoted to *perfumes*, the observer might reasonably have felt some surprise; and this surprise might have been augmented if he had followed Mr. Pembury's subsequent proceedings, and especially if he had considered them as the actions of a man whose immediate aim was the removal of a superfluous unit of the population.

Having deposited his bag and umbrella in his room, Pembury set forth from the hotel as one with a definite purpose; and his footsteps led, in the first place, to an umbrella shop in the Strand, where he selected a thick rattan cane. There was nothing remarkable in this, perhaps; but the cane was of an uncomely thickness, and the salesman protested.

"I like a thick cane," said Pembury.

"Yes, sir; but for a gentleman of your height" (Pembury was a small, slightly built man), "I would venture to suggest —"

"I like a thick cane," repeated Pembury. "Cut it down to the proper length, and don't rivet the ferrule on."

His next investment would have seemed more to the purpose, though suggestive of unexpected crudity of method. It was a large Norwegian knife. Not content with this, he went on to a second cutler's, and purchased another knife, the exact duplicate of the first.

Shopping appeared to be a positive mania with Rufus Pembury. In the course of the next half hour he acquired a cheap hand-bag, an artist's japanned brush-case, a three-cornered

file, a stick of elastic glue, and a pair of iron crucible-tongs. Still insatiable, he repaired to a chemist's shop, where he further enriched himself with a packet of absorbent cotton-wool and an ounce of permanganate of potash; and, as the chemist wrapped up these articles, Pembury watched him impassively.

"I suppose you don't keep musk?" he asked.

The chemist paused in the act of heating a stick of sealing-wax. "No, sir, not the solid musk; it's so very costly. But I have the essence."

"That isn't as strong as the pure stuff, I suppose?"

"No," replied the chemist, with a smile, "not *so* strong, but strong enough. These animal perfumes are so very penetrating, you know, and so lasting. Why, I venture to say that if you were to sprinkle a table-spoonful of the essence in the middle of St. Paul's, the place would smell of it six months hence."

"You don't say so!" said Pembury. "Well, that ought to be enough for anybody. I'll take a small quantity, please, and, for goodness' sake, see that there isn't any on the outside of the bottle. The stuff isn't for myself, and I don't want to go about smelling like a civet-cat."

"Naturally you don't," agreed the chemist.

"There, sir," said he, when the musk was ready, "there is not a drop on the outside of the bottle, and, if I fit it with a rubber cork, you will be quite secure."

Pembury's dislike of musk appeared to be excessive, for, when the chemist had retired to change half a crown, he took the brush-case from the hand-bag, pulled off its lid, and then, with the crucible-tongs, daintily lifted the bottle off the counter, slid it softly into the brush-case, and, replacing the lid, returned the case and tongs to the bag. The other two packets he took from the counter and dropped into his pocket; and, having received his change, left the shop and walked thoughtfully back toward the Strand. Suddenly a new idea seemed to strike him. He halted, and then strode away northward to make the oddest of all his purchases.

The transaction took place in a shop in the Seven Dials whose strange stock in trade ranged from water-snails to Angora cats. Pembury looked at a cage of guinea-pigs in the window, and entered the shop.

"Do you happen to have a dead guinea-pig?" he asked.

"No; mine are all alive," replied the man, adding, with a sinister grin: "but they're not immortal, you know."

Pembury looked at the man distastefully. There is an appreciable difference between

a guinea-pig and a blackmailer. "Any small mammal would do," he said.

"There's a dead rat in that cage, if he's any good," said the man. "Died this morning."

"I'll take the rat," said Pembury; "he'll do quite well."

Accordingly the little corpse was wrapped up in a parcel and deposited in the bag, and Pembury made his way back to the hotel.

the wooden handle, and laid the knife down, open. Then he unwrapped the dead rat which he had bought at the zoölogist's. Laying the animal on a sheet of paper, he cut off its head, and, holding it up by the tail, allowed the blood to drop on the knife, spreading it over both sides of the blade and handle.

Then he laid the knife on the paper, and softly opened the window. From the darkness

below came the voice of a cat, and in its direction Pembury flung the body and head of the rat, and closed the window.

Finally, having washed his hands and stuffed the paper from the parcel into the fireplace, he went to bed.



After a modest lunch he spent the remainder of the day transacting the business that had originally brought him to town. He did not return to his hotel until ten o'clock, when he went immediately to his room. But before undressing (and after locking his door) he did a very strange and unaccountable thing. Having pulled off the loose ferrule from his newly purchased cane, he bored a hole in the bottom of it with the spike end of the file. Then, with the file, he enlarged the hole until only a narrow rim of the bottom was left. He next rolled up a small ball of cotton-wool and pushed it into the ferrule: and, having smeared the end of the cane with elastic glue, he replaced the ferrule, warming it over the gas to make the glue stick.

When he had finished with the cane, he turned his attention to one of the Norwegian knives. First, with the file, he carefully removed most of the bright yellow varnish from

"I SHOULD RECKERNIZE YOU AMONG
TEN THOUSAND"

His proceedings in the morning were equally mysterious. Having breakfasted betimes, he returned to his bedroom and locked himself in. Then he tied his new cane, handle downward, to the leg of the dressing-table. Next, with the crucible-tongs, he drew the little bottle of musk from the brush-case, and, having assured himself, by sniffing at it, that the exterior was really free from odor, he withdrew the rubber cork. Then, slowly and with infinite care, he poured perhaps half a teaspoonful of the essence on the cotton-wool that bulged from the hole in the ferrule. When it was saturated, he

proceeded to treat the knife in the same fashion, letting a little of the essence fall on the wooden handle, which soaked it up readily. This done, he opened the window and looked out. The body of the rat had disappeared. Holding out the musk-bottle, he dropped it into some laurel bushes that grew in the yard below, flinging the rubber cork after it.

His next proceeding was to squeeze a small quantity of vaseline on his fingers, and thoroughly to smear the shoulder of the brush-case and the inside of the lid, so as to insure an air-tight joint. Having wiped his fingers, he picked up the knife with the crucible-tongs, and, dropping it into the brush-case, immediately pushed on the lid. Then he heated the tips of the tongs in the gas flame, to destroy the scent, packed the tongs and brush-case in his bag, untied the cane,—carefully avoiding contact with the ferrule,—and, taking up the two bags, went out, holding the cane by its middle.

There was no difficulty in finding an empty compartment, for first-class passengers were few at that time in the morning. Pembury waited on the platform until the guard's whistle sounded; then he stepped into the compartment, shut the door, and laid the cane on the seat, with its ferrule projecting out of the off-side window; in which position it remained until the train drew into Baysford Station.

Pembury left his dressing-bag in the cloak-room, and, again grasping the cane by its middle, and carrying the smaller hand-bag, he sallied forth. The town of Baysford lay about half a mile to the east of the station; his own house was a mile along the road to the west; and half way between his house and the station was the residence of General O'Gorman. Pembury knew the place well. It stood on the edge of a great expanse of flat meadows, and communicated with the road by an avenue, nearly three hundred yards long, of ancient trees. The avenue was shut off from the road by a pair of iron gates; but these were merely ornamental, for the place was accessible from the surrounding meadows—indeed, an indistinct foot-path crossed the meadows and intersected the avenue about half way up.

Pembury approached the avenue by the foot-path, and, as he entered it, examined the adjacent trees with more than a casual interest. The two between which he had entered were an elm and a great pollard oak, the latter being an immense tree whose huge, warty bole divided, about seven feet from the ground, into three limbs, each as large as a fair-sized tree, of which the largest swept outward in a great curve half way across the avenue. On this patriarch Pembury bestowed special attention, walking com-

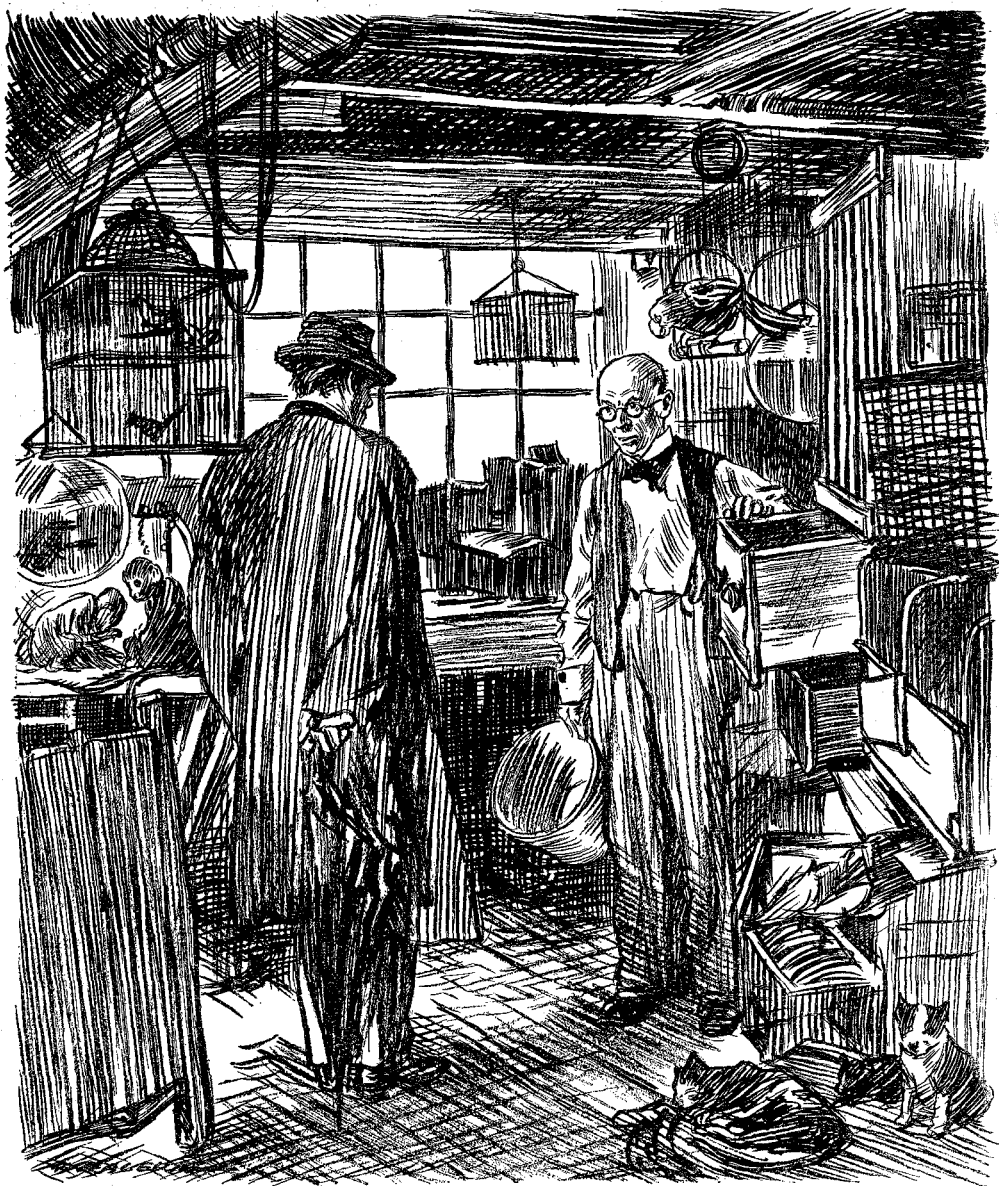
pletely around it, and finally laying down his bag and cane (the latter resting on the bag, with the ferrule off the ground), that he might climb up, by the aid of the warty outgrowths, to examine the crown.

Apparently the oak did not meet his requirements, for he climbed down again. Then, beyond the elm, he caught sight of an ancient pollard hornbeam—a strange, fantastic tree whose trunk widened out trumpetlike, above, into a broad crown, from the edge of which multitudinous branches uprose like the limbs of some weird hamadryad.

The crown of the trunk was barely six feet from the ground, and he found that he could reach it easily. Standing the cane against the tree,—ferrule down this time,—he took the brush-case from his bag, pulled off the lid, and, with the crucible-tongs, lifted out the knife and laid it on the crown of the tree, just out of sight, leaving the tongs, also invisible, still grasping the knife. He was about to replace the brush-case in the bag, when he appeared to alter his mind. Sniffing at it, and finding it reeking with the sickly perfume, he pushed the lid on again, and threw the case up into the tree, where he heard it roll down into the central hollow of the crown. Then he closed the bag, and, taking the cane by its handle, moved slowly away in the direction whence he had come, passing out of the avenue between the elm and the oak.

His mode of progress was certainly peculiar. He walked very slowly, trailing the cane along the ground, and every few paces he stopped and pressed the ferrule firmly against the earth. To any one observing him, he would have appeared wrapped in an absorbing reverie. In this manner he moved across the fields, not returning to the highroad until he came to a narrow lane that led out into High Street. Immediately opposite the lane was the police station, distinguished from the adjacent cottages only by its lamp, its open door, and the notices posted up outside. Straight across the road Pembury walked, still trailing the cane, and halted at the station door to read the notices, resting his cane on the door-step as he did so. Through the open doorway he could see a man writing at a desk. The man's back was toward him, but presently a movement brought his left hand into view, and Pembury noted that the forefinger was missing. This, then, was Jack Ellis, late of the Civil Guard at Portland.

Even while he was looking, the man turned his head, and Pembury recognized him at once. He had frequently met him on the road between Baysford and the adjoining village of Thorpe, and always at the same time. Apparently Ellis



"DO YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE A DEAD GUINEA-PIG?' HE ASKED"

paid a daily visit to Thorpe,—perhaps to receive a report from the rural constable,—starting between three and four and returning at seven or a quarter past.

Pembury looked at his watch. It was fifteen minutes after three. He moved away thoughtfully (holding his cane by the middle now), and began to walk slowly in the direction of Thorpe. For a while he was deeply meditative and his face wore a puzzled frown. Then it suddenly cleared, and he strode forward at a brisker pace. Presently he passed through a gap in the hedge, and, walking in a field parallel with the road, took out his purse—a small pigskin pouch.

Having frugally emptied it of its contents, excepting a few shillings, he thrust the ferrule of his cane into the small compartment ordinarily reserved for gold or notes. And thus he continued to walk on slowly, carrying the cane by the middle, with the purse jammed on the end.

At length he reached a sharp double curve in the road, whence he could see back for a considerable distance, and here, opposite a small opening, he sat down to wait. The hedge would screen him effectually from the gaze of passers-by without interfering with his view.

A quarter of an hour passed. He began to

be uneasy. Had he been mistaken? Were Ellis' visits only occasional instead of daily, as he had thought? That would be tiresome, though not actually disastrous. But at this point in his reflections a figure came into view, advancing along the road with a steady swing. He recognized the figure as Ellis. But there was another person advancing from the opposite direction, apparently a laborer. Pembury prepared to shift his ground, but another glance showed him that the laborer would pass first. He waited. The laborer came on, and at length passed the opening. After the laborer had gone on, Ellis disappeared for a moment in a bend of the road. Instantly Pembury passed his cane through the opening in the hedge, shook off the purse, and pushed it into the middle of the footway. Then he crept forward behind the hedge toward the approaching officer, and again sat down to wait. On came the steady tramp of the unsuspecting Ellis, and, as the sound passed, Pembury drew aside an obstructing branch and peered out at the retreating figure. Would Ellis see the purse? It was not a conspicuous object.

The footsteps stopped abruptly. Looking out, Pembury saw the police official stoop, pick up the purse, examine its contents, and finally stow it in his trousers pocket. Pembury heaved a sigh of relief, and, as the figure passed out of sight round a curve in the road, he rose, stretched himself, and strode briskly away.

A group of ricks suggested a fresh idea. Walking to the farther side of one of the ricks, and thrusting his cane deeply into it, he pushed it home with a piece of stick until the handle was lost in the straw. The hand-bag was now all that was left. He opened it and smelled of its interior, but, though he could detect no odor, he resolved to be rid of it.

As he emerged from the gap, a wagon jogged slowly by. Stepping into the road, Pembury quickly overtook the wagon, and, having glanced around, laid the bag lightly on the tail-board. Then he set off for the station to get his dressing-bag.

On arriving home, he went straight up to his bedroom, and, ringing for the housekeeper, ordered a substantial meal. Then he took off his clothes, and deposited them, even to the shirt, socks, and necktie, in a trunk in which his summer clothing was stored, with a plentiful sprinkling of naphthol to preserve it from moths. Taking the packet of permanganate of potash from his dressing-bag, he passed into the adjoining bath-room, and, tipping the crystals into the bath, turned on the water. Soon the bath was filled with a pink solution of the salt, and into this Pembury plunged, immersing his

entire body and thoroughly soaking his hair. Then he emptied the bath, rinsed himself in clear water, and dressed in fresh clothing. Finally he ate a hearty meal, and then lay down to rest until it should be time to start for the rendezvous.

Half past six found him lurking in the shadow by the station approach, within sight of the solitary lamp. He heard the train come in, saw the stream of passengers emerge, and noted one figure detach itself from the throng and turn into the Thorpe road. It was Pratt, as the lamplight showed him — Pratt striding forward to the meeting-place with an air of jaunty satisfaction and an uncommonly creaky pair of boots.

Pembury followed him at a distance, until he was well past the stile at the entrance to the foot-path. Evidently he was going on to the gates. Then Pembury vaulted over the stile and strode swiftly across the dark meadows.

When he plunged into the deep gloom of the avenue, his first act was to grope his way to the hornbeam, and slip his hand up to the crown to satisfy himself that the tongs were as he had left them. Reassured by the touch of his fingers on the iron loops, he turned and walked slowly down the avenue. The duplicate knife, ready opened, was in his left inside breast pocket, and he fingered its handle as he walked.

Presently the iron gate squeaked mournfully, and then the rhythmical creak of a pair of boots coming up the avenue was audible. Pembury walked forward slowly until a darker smear emerged from the surrounding gloom, when he called out:

"Is that you, Pratt?"

"That's me," was the cheerful response, and, as he drew nearer, the ex-warder asked:

"Have you brought the rhino, old man?"

The insolent familiarity of the man's tone strengthened Pembury's nerve and hardened his heart. "Of course," he replied; "but we must have a definite understanding, you know."

"Look here," said Pratt. "I've got no time for jaw. The General will be here presently; he's riding over from Bingfield with a friend. You hand over the dibbs, and we'll talk some other time."

"That is all very well," said Pembury, "but you must understand —" He paused abruptly, and stood still. They were now close to the hornbeam, and, as he stood, he stared up into the dark mass of foliage.

"What's the matter?" demanded Pratt. "What are you staring at?"

He, too, had halted, and now stood gazing intently into the darkness.

Then, in an instant, Pembury whipped out

the knife, and drove it, with all his strength, into the broad back of the ex-warder, below the left shoulder-blade.

With a hideous yell, Pratt turned and grappled with his assailant. A powerful man, and a competent wrestler, he was far more than a match for Pembury unarmed, and in a moment he had him by the throat. But Pembury clung to him tightly, and, as they trampled to and fro, round and round, he stabbed again and again, with the viciousness of a scorpion, while Pratt's cries grew gurgling and husky. Then they fell heavily to the ground, Pembury underneath. Pratt relaxed his hold, and in a moment grew limp and inert. Pembury pushed him off and rose, breathing heavily.

But he wasted no time. There had been more noise than he had bargained for. Quickly stepping to the hornbeam, he reached up for the tongs. His fingers slid into the looped handles of the tongs that grasped the knife, and he lifted it out from its hiding-place and deposited it on the ground a few feet from the body. Then he went back to the tree and carefully pushed the tongs over into the hollow of the crown.

At this moment a woman's voice sounded shrilly from the top of the avenue.

"Is that you, Mr. Pratt?" it called.

Pembury started, and then stepped back quickly, on tiptoe, to the body. For there was the duplicate knife. He must take that away at all costs.

The corpse was lying on its back. The knife was underneath it, driven into the very haft. Pembury had to use both hands to lift the body, and even then he had some difficulty in disengaging the weapon. And, meanwhile, the voice, repeating its question, came nearer.

At last he succeeded in drawing out the knife, and thrust it into his breast pocket. The corpse fell back, and he stood up, gasping.

"Mr. Pratt! Are you there?"

The nearness of the voice startled Pembury, and, turning sharply, he saw a light twinkling between the trees. And then the gates creaked loudly, and he heard the crunch of a horse's hoofs on the gravel.

He stood for an instant, bewildered, utterly taken by surprise. He had not reckoned on a horse. His intended flight across the meadows toward Thorpe was now impossible. If he were overtaken he would be lost; for he knew there was blood on his clothes and hands, to say nothing of the knife in his pocket.

But his confusion lasted only for an instant. He remembered the oak tree, and ran to it. Touching it as little as possible with his bloody hands, he climbed quickly up into the crown. The great horizontal limb was nearly three feet

in diameter, and, as he lay out on it, gathering his coat closely about him, he was quite invisible from below.

He had hardly settled himself when the light that he had seen came into full view, revealing a woman advancing with a stable lantern in her hand. And, almost at the same moment, a streak of brighter light burst from the opposite direction. The horseman was accompanied by a man on a bicycle.

The two men came on apace, and the horseman, sighting the woman, called out: "Anything the matter, Mrs. Parton?"

But at that moment the light of the bicycle lamp fell full on the prostrate corpse. The two men uttered a simultaneous cry of horror, the woman shrieked aloud; and then the horseman sprang from the saddle and ran toward the body.

"Why," he exclaimed, stooping over it, "it's Pratt!" And, as the cyclist came up, and his lamp shone on a great pool of blood, he added:

"There's been foul play here, Hanford."

Hanford flashed his lamp around the body, lighting up the ground for several yards.

"What is that behind you, O'Gorman?" he said suddenly. "Isn't it a knife?"

He was moving quickly toward it, when O'Gorman held up his hand.

"Don't touch it!" he exclaimed. "We'll put the hounds on to it. They'll soon track the scoundrel, whoever he is. Hanford, this fellow has fairly delivered himself into our hands!"

He stood looking down at the knife with something uncommonly like exultation, and then, turning quickly to his friend, said:

"Look here, Hanford, you ride off to the police station as hard as you can pelt. Send or bring an officer, and I'll scour the meadows meanwhile. If I haven't got the scoundrel when you come back, we'll put the hounds on to his knife and run the beggar down."

"Right!" replied Hanford, and rode away into the darkness.

"Mrs. Parton," said O'Gorman, "watch that knife. See that nobody touches it, while I go and search the meadows."

Pembury's position was cramped and uncomfortable; but he hardly dared to breathe, for the woman below him was not a dozen yards away. It was with mingled feelings of relief and apprehension that he presently saw a group of lights approaching rapidly along the road from Baysford. For a time they were hidden by the trees, and then, the whirl of wheels sounded on the drive, and streaks of light on the tree-trunks announced the new arrivals. There were three bicycles, ridden by Mr. Hanford, a police inspector, and a sergeant;

and, as they drew up, the General came thundering back into the avenue.

"Is Ellis with you?" he asked, as he pulled up.

"No, sir," was the reply. "He hadn't come in from Thorpe when we left. He's late."

"Have you sent for a doctor?"

"Yes, sir; I've sent for Dr. Hills," said the inspector. "Is Pratt dead?"

"Seems to be," replied O'Gorman, "but we'd better leave that to the doctor. There's the murderer's knife. Nobody has touched it. I'm going to fetch the bloodhounds now."

"Ah, that's the thing!" said the inspector. "The man can't be far away." He rubbed his hands with a satisfied air as O'Gorman cantered away up the avenue.

In less than a minute there came out of the darkness the deep baying of hounds. Then into the circle of light emerged three sinister shapes, loose-limbed and gaunt, in charge of the General and a man.

"Here, inspector," shouted the General, "you take one; I can't hold 'em both."

The inspector ran forward and seized one of the leashes, and the General led his hound up to the knife on the ground. Pembury watched the great brute with almost impersonal curiosity.

For some minutes the hound stood motionless, sniffing at the knife; then it turned away, and walked to and fro with its muzzle to the ground. Suddenly it lifted its head, bayed loudly, lowered its muzzle, and started forward between the oak and the elm, dragging the General after it at a run.

Then the inspector brought his hound to the knife, and was soon bounding away to the tug of the leash in the General's wake.

"They don't make no mistakes, they don't," said the man Bailey, addressing the gratified sergeant, as he brought forward the third hound; "you'll see ——"

But his remark was cut short by a violent jerk of the leash, and the next minute he was flying after the others, followed by Mr. Hanford.

The sergeant daintily picked up the knife by its ring, wrapped it in his handkerchief, and bestowed it in his pocket. Then he ran off after the hounds.

Pembury smiled grimly. His scheme was working out admirably, in spite of the unforeseen difficulties. If that confounded woman would only go away, he could climb down and take himself off while the course was clear. He listened to the baying of the hounds gradually growing fainter, and cursed the dilatoriness of the doctor. Confound the fellow! Didn't he realize that this was a case of life or death? Those infernal doctors had no sense of responsibility.

Suddenly a fresh light appeared coming up

the avenue, and then a bicycle swept up to the scene of the tragedy, and a small, elderly man jumped down beside the body. He stooped over the dead man, felt the wrist, pushed back an eyelid, held a match to the eye, and rose.

"This is a shocking affair, Mrs. Parton," said he. "The poor fellow is quite dead. You had better help me carry him to the house."

Pembury watched them raise the body and stagger away with it up the avenue. He heard their shuffling steps die away, and the door of the house shut. And still he listened. From far away in the meadows came, at intervals, the baying of the hounds. Other sound there was none. Presently the doctor would come back for his bicycle, but for the moment the coast was clear. Pembury rose stiffly. His hands had stuck to the tree where they had pressed against it, and they were still sticky and damp. Quickly he let himself down to the ground, listened again for a moment, and then, making a small circuit to avoid the lamplight, crossed the avenue and stole away across the meadows.

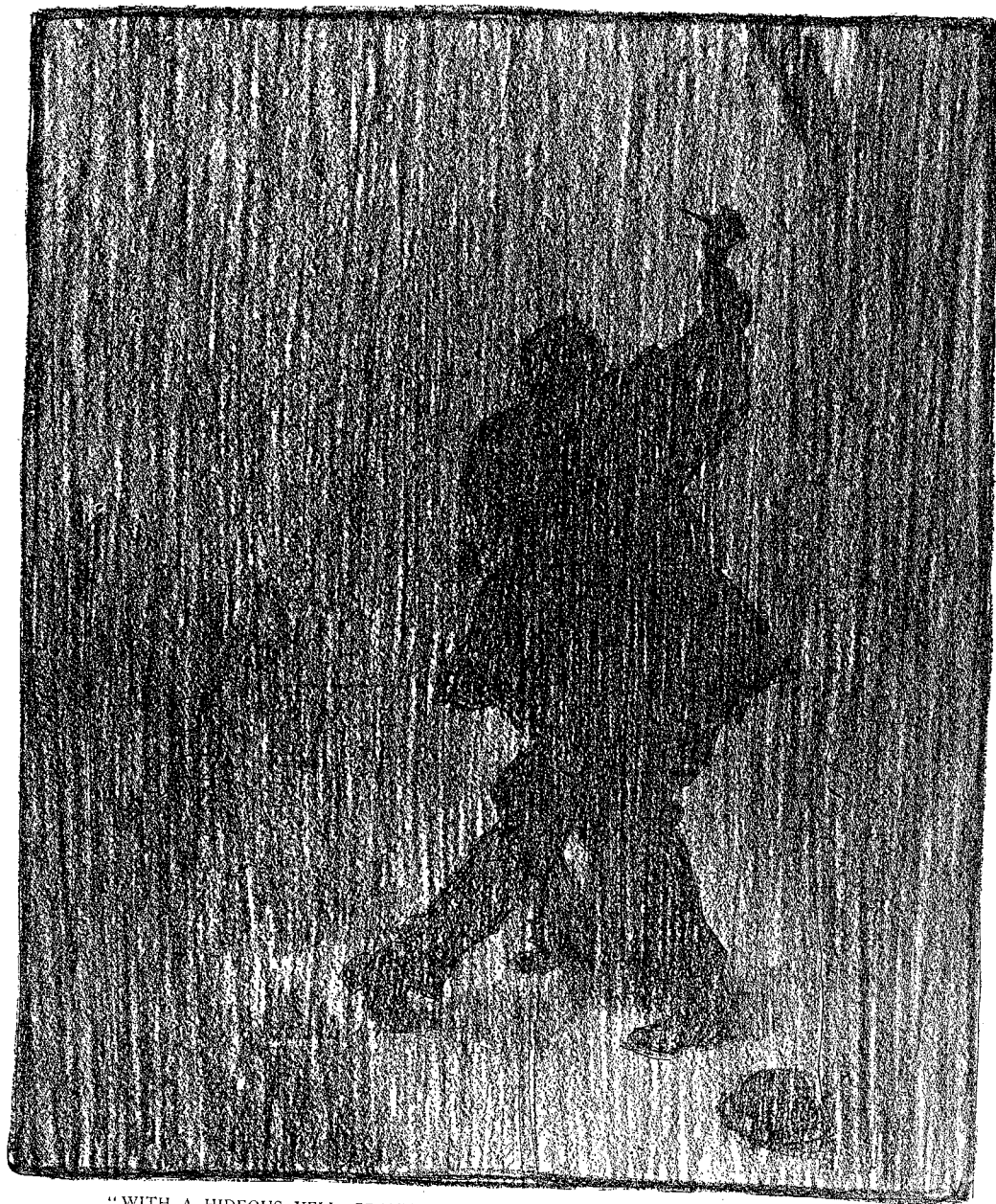
The night was intensely dark, and not a soul was stirring. He strode forward quickly, peering into the darkness, and stopping now and again to listen; but no sound came to his ears save the now faint baying of the distant hounds. Not far from his house, he remembered, was a deep ditch spanned by a wooden bridge, and toward this he now made his way; for he knew that his appearance would convict him at a glance. Arrived at the ditch, he stooped to wash his hands and wrists; and, as he bent forward, the knife fell from his breast pocket into the shallow water. He groped for it, found it, and drove it deep into the mud as far out as he could reach. Then he wiped his hands on some water-weed, crossed the bridge, and started homeward.

He approached his house from the rear, satisfied himself that his housekeeper was in the kitchen, and, letting himself in very quietly with his key, went quickly up to his bedroom. Here he washed thoroughly,—in the bath, so he could get rid of the discolored water,—changed his clothes, and packed those that he took off in a portmanteau.

By the time he had done this the supper gong sounded. As he took his seat at the table, spruce and fresh in appearance, quietly cheerful in manner, he addressed his housekeeper. "I wasn't able to finish my business in London," he said. "I shall have to go up again to-morrow."

"Shall you come back the same day?" asked the housekeeper.

"Perhaps," was the reply, "and perhaps not. It will depend on circumstances."



"WITH A HIDEOUS YELL, PRATT TURNED AND GRAPPLED WITH HIS ASSAILANT"

He did not say what the circumstances might be, nor did the housekeeper ask. Mr. Pembury was not addicted to confidences. He was an eminently discreet man; and discreet men say little.

PART II—JERVIS SPEAKS

The autumn morning was cool, the fire roared jovially. I thrust my slippered feet toward the blaze, and meditated on nothing in particular, with catlike enjoyment. Presently a disap-

proving grunt from Thorndyke attracted my attention, and I looked round lazily. With the shears he was extracting the readable portions of the morning paper, and had paused with a small cutting between his finger and thumb.

"Bloodhounds again," said he. "We shall be hearing presently of the revival of the ordeal by fire."

"And a deuced comfortable ordeal, too, on a morning like this," I said. "What is the case?"

He was about to reply, when a sharp rat-tat from the little brass knocker announced a dis-

turber of our peace. Thorndyke admitted a police inspector in uniform.

"I believe I am speaking to Dr. Thorndyke?" said the officer; and, as Thorndyke nodded, he went on:

"My name, sir, is Fox — Inspector Fox of the Baysford police. Perhaps you've seen by the morning paper that we have had to arrest one of our own men? That's rather awkward, you know, sir."

"Very," agreed Thorndyke.

"Yes, it's bad; but we had to do it. There was no way out, that we could see. Still, we want the accused to have every chance, both for our sake and for his own, so the chief constable thought he'd like to have your opinion on the case."

"Let us have the particulars," said Thorndyke, taking a writing-pad from a drawer. "Begin at the beginning," he added, "and tell us all you know."

"Well," said the inspector, after a preliminary cough, "to begin with the murdered man, his name is Pratt. He was a retired prison warder, and was employed as steward by General O'Gorman, who is a retired prison governor — you may have heard of him in connection with his pack of bloodhounds.

"Well, Pratt came down from London yesterday evening by a train arriving at Baysford at six thirty. He was seen by the guard, the ticket collector, and the outside porter. The porter saw him leave the station at six thirty-seven. General O'Gorman's house is about half a mile from the station.

"At five minutes to seven, the General and a gentleman named Hanford, and the General's housekeeper, a Mrs. Parton, found Pratt lying dead in the avenue that leads up to the house. Apparently he had been stabbed, for there was a lot of blood about, and a knife — a Norwegian knife — was lying on the ground near the body. Mrs. Parton had thought she heard some one in the avenue calling out for help, and she came out with a lantern. She met the General and Mr. Hanford, and all three seem to have caught sight of the body at the same moment.

"Mr. Hanford cycled down to us at once with the news. We sent for a doctor, and I went back with Mr. Hanford, and took a sergeant with me. Then the General, who had galloped his horse over the meadows each side of the avenue without having seen anybody, fetched out his bloodhounds and led them up to the knife. All three hounds took up the scent at once, — I held the leash of one of them, — and they took us across the meadows without a pause, or a falter, over stiles and fences, along a lane, out into the town, and then, one after the other,

they crossed the road in a bee-line to the police station, bolted in at the door, which stood open, and made straight for the desk, where a supernumerary officer named Ellis was writing. They made a rare to-do, struggling to get at him, and it was as much as we could do to hold them back. As for Ellis, he turned as pale as a ghost."

"Was any one else in the room?" asked Thorndyke.

"Oh, yes; there were two constables and a messenger. We led the hounds up to them, but the brutes wouldn't take any notice of them. They wanted Ellis."

"And what did you do?"

"Why, we arrested Ellis, of course. Couldn't do anything else."

"Is there anything against the accused man?"

"Yes, there is. He and Pratt were on distinctly unfriendly terms. They were old comrades, for Ellis was in the Civil Guard at Portland when Pratt was warder there — he was pensioned off from the service because he got his left forefinger chopped off. But lately they had had some unpleasantness about a woman."

"And what sort of a man is Ellis?"

"A remarkably decent fellow, he always seemed, quiet, steady, good-natured; I should have said he wouldn't hurt a fly. We all liked him — better than we liked Pratt, in fact, for poor Pratt was what you'd call an old soldier — sly, you know, sir, and a bit of a sneak."

"You searched and examined Ellis, of course?"

"Yes. There was nothing suspicious about him, except that he had two purses. But he says he picked up one of them — a small pig-skin pouch — on the foot-path of the Thorpe road yesterday afternoon. At any rate, the purse was not Pratt's."

Thorndyke made a note on his pad, and then asked: "There were no bloodstains or marks on his clothing?"

"No; his clothing was not marked or disarranged in any way."

"Any cuts, scratches, or bruises on his person?"

"None whatever," replied the inspector.

"At what time did you arrest Ellis?"

"Half past seven exactly."

"Have you ascertained what his movements were? Had he been near the scene of the murder?"

"Yes; he had been to Thorpe, and would pass the gates of the avenue on his way back. And he was later than usual in returning, though not later than he has often been before."

"And now, as to the murdered man. Has the body been examined?"

"Yes; I had Dr. Hills' report before I left.

There were no less than seven deep knife-wounds, all on the left side of the back. The knife, covered with blood, was found near the body."

"What has been done with it, by the way?" asked Thorndyke.

"The sergeant who was with me picked it up and rolled it in his handkerchief to carry in his pocket. I took it from him just as it was, and locked it in a despatch-box, handkerchief and all."

"Has the knife been recognized as Ellis' property?"

"No, sir; it has not."

"Were there any recognizable footprints or marks of a struggle?" Thorndyke asked.

The inspector grinned sheepishly. "I haven't examined the spot, of course, sir," said he; "but, after the General's horse and the bloodhounds and Mr. Hanford had been over it twice, going and returning, why, you see, sir —"

"Exactly, exactly," said Thorndyke. "Well, inspector, I shall be pleased to act for the defense. It seems to me that the case against Ellis is, in some respects, rather inconclusive."

The inspector was frankly amazed. "It hadn't struck me in that light, sir," he said.

"No? Well, that is my view; and I think the best plan will be for me to come down with you and investigate matters on the spot."

The inspector assented cheerfully, and we withdrew to prepare for the expedition.

"You are coming, I suppose, Jervis?" said Thorndyke.

"If I shall be of any use," I replied.

"Of course you will," said he. "Two heads are better than one, and, by the look

of things, ours will be the only ones with any sense in them. We will take the research case, of course, and we may as well have a camera with us."

The corpse had been laid on a billiard-table on a pair of horse-cloths covered with a waterproof sheet, and the dead man's clothes were on a side-table. Thorndyke first directed his attention to the former, and we stooped together over the gaping wounds. Then, turning to the table, Thorndyke held up the coat, waistcoat, and shirt, and, having examined the holes in them through a lens, handed them to me without comment. Neither the wounds nor the clothes presented anything particularly suggestive. Evidently the weapon used had been a thick-backed, single-edged knife like the one described, and the discoloration around the

wounds indicated that the weapon had a definite shoulder, like that of a Norwegian knife, and that it had been driven in with savage violence. These proceedings the General viewed with evident impatience, and presently he withdrew.

"Do you find anything that throws any light on the case?" the inspector asked, when the examination was concluded.

"That is impossible to say until we have seen the knife," replied Thorndyke; "but, while we are waiting for it, we may as well go and look at the scene of the tragedy. These are Pratt's boots, I think?" He lifted a pair of stout laced boots from the table, and inspected the soles.

"Yes," replied Fox, "and pretty easy they'd have been to track, if the case had been the other way



"REVEALING A WOMAN WITH A STABLE LANTERN IN HER HAND"

about. Those protectors are as good as a trade-mark."

"We'll take the boots, at any rate," said Thorndyke; and we went out and walked down the avenue.

The place where the murder had been committed was easily identified by a large dark stain on the gravel at one side of the drive, half way between two trees — an ancient pollard hornbeam and an elm. Next to the elm was a pollard oak with a squat, warty bole about seven feet high, and three enormous limbs, of which one slanted half way across the avenue; and between these two trees the ground was covered with the tracks of men and hounds superimposed upon the hoof-prints of a horse.

"Where was the knife found?" Thorndyke asked.

The inspector indicated a spot near the middle of the drive, almost opposite the hornbeam, and Thorndyke, picking up a large stone, laid it on the spot. Then he surveyed the scene thoughtfully, looking up and down the drive, and at the trees that bordered it, and finally walked slowly to the space between the elm and the oak, scanning the ground as he went. "There is no dearth of footprints," he remarked grimly, as he looked down at the trampled earth.

"No; but the question is, whose are they?" said the inspector.

"Yes, that is the question," agreed Thorndyke; "and we will begin the solution by identifying those of Pratt."

"I don't see how that will help us," said the inspector. "We know he was here."

"The hue-and-cry procession," remarked Thorndyke, "seems to have passed out between the elm and the oak; elsewhere the ground seems pretty clear."

He walked around the elm, still looking earnestly at the ground, and presently continued:

"Now, here, in the soft earth bordering the turf, are the prints of a pair of smallish feet wearing pointed boots — a rather short man, evidently, by the size of foot and length of stride, and he doesn't seem to have belonged to the procession. But I don't see Pratt's; he doesn't seem to have come off the hard gravel."

He continued to walk slowly toward the hornbeam, with his eyes fixed on the ground. Suddenly he halted, and stooped with an eager look at the earth; and, as Fox and I approached, he stood up and pointed.

"Pratt's footprints — faint and fragmentary, but unmistakable. And now, inspector, you see their importance. They furnish the time factor in respect to the other footprints. Look at this one, and then look at that."

He pointed from one to another of the faint impressions of the dead man's foot.

"You mean that there are signs of a struggle?" said Fox.

"I mean more than that," replied Thorndyke. "Here is one of Pratt's footprints treading into the print of a small, pointed foot; and there, at the edge of the gravel, is another of Pratt's, nearly obliterated by the tread of a pointed foot. Obviously, the first footprint was made before Pratt's, and the second one after his; and the necessary inference is that the owner of the pointed foot was here at the same time as Pratt."

"Then he must have been the murderer!" exclaimed Fox.

"Presumably," answered Thorndyke; "but let us see whither he went."

"You notice, in the first place, that the man stood close to this tree," — he indicated the hornbeam, — "and that he went toward the elm. Let us follow him. He passes the elm, you see, and you will observe that these tracks form a regular series, leading from the hornbeam and not mixed up with the marks of the struggle. They were, therefore, probably made after the murder. You will also notice that they pass along the backs of the trees — outside the avenue, that is. What does that suggest to you?"

"It suggests to me," I said, when the inspector had shaken his head hopelessly, "that there was possibly some one in the avenue when the man was stealing off."

"Precisely," said Thorndyke. "The body was found not more than nine minutes after Pratt arrived here. But the murder must have taken some time. Let us follow the tracks. They pass the elm, and go behind the next tree. But wait! there is something odd here."

He passed behind the great pollard oak, and looked down at the soft earth at its roots.

"Here is a pair of impressions much deeper than the rest, and they are not a part of the track, since their toes point toward the tree. What do you make of that?"

Without waiting for an answer, he began closely to scan the bole of the tree, and especially a large, warty protuberance about three feet from the ground. On the bark above this was a vertical mark, as if something had scraped down the tree, and from the wart itself a dead twig had been newly broken off and lay upon the ground. Thorndyke set his foot on the protuberance, and, springing up, brought his eye above the level of the crown, from which the great boughs branched out.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Here is something much more definite."

He scrambled up into the crown of the tree, and, having glanced quickly around, beckoned to us. I stepped upon the projecting stump, and, as my eyes rose above the crown, I perceived the brown, shiny impression of a hand on the edge. Climbing into the crown, I was quickly followed by the inspector, and we both stood up by Thorndyke between the three boughs. From where we stood we looked on the upper side of the great limb that swept out across the avenue; and there, on its lichen-covered surface, we saw the imprints, in reddish-brown, of a pair of open hands.

"You notice," said Thorndyke, leaning out upon the bough, "that he is a short man — I cannot conveniently place my hands so low. You also, note that he has both forefingers intact, and so is certainly not Ellis."

"If you mean to say, sir, that these marks were made by the murderer," said Fox, "I say it is impossible. Why, that would mean that he was here looking down at us when we were searching for him with the hounds! The presence of the hounds proves that this man could not have been the murderer."

"On the contrary," said Thorndyke, "the presence of this man with bloody hands confirms the other evidence, which all indicates that the hounds were never on the murderer's trail at all. Come, now, inspector, I put it to you: Here is a murdered man. The murderer almost certainly has blood upon his hands. And here is a man with bloody hands lurking in a tree within a few feet of the corpse, and within a few minutes of its discovery — as is shown by the footprints. What are the reasonable probabilities?"

"But you are forgetting the bloodhounds, sir, and the murderer's knife," urged the inspector.

"Tut, tut, man!" exclaimed Thorndyke. "Those bloodhounds are a positive obsession. But I see a sergeant coming up the drive — with the knife, I hope. Perhaps that will solve the riddle for us."

The sergeant, who carried a small despatch-box, halted opposite the tree in some surprise while we descended, when he came forward, with a military salute, and handed the box to the inspector; who forthwith unlocked it, and, lifting the lid, displayed an object wrapped in a pocket handkerchief.

"There is the knife, sir," said he, "just as I received it. The handkerchief is the sergeant's."

Thorndyke unrolled the handkerchief, and took from it a large-sized Norwegian knife, which he looked at critically and handed to me. While I was inspecting the blade, he shook out the handkerchief, and, having looked it over on both sides, turned to the sergeant and asked:

"At what time did you pick up this knife?"

"About seven fifteen, sir, directly after the hounds had started. I was careful to pick it up by the ring, and I wrapped it in the handkerchief at once."

"Seven fifteen," said Thorndyke — "less than half an hour after the murder. That is very singular. Do you observe the state of this handkerchief? There is not a mark on it, not a trace of any bloodstain, which shows that when the knife was picked up the blood on it was dry. Things dry slowly, if they dry at all, in the air of an autumn evening. The appearances seem to suggest that the blood on the knife was dry when it was thrown down. By the way, sergeant, what do you scent your handkerchief with?"

"Scent, sir!" exclaimed the astonished officer. "Me scent my handkerchief! No, sir, certainly not. Never used scent in my life, sir."

Thorndyke held out the handkerchief, and the sergeant sniffed at it incredulously.

"It certainly does seem to smell of scent," he admitted, "but it must be the knife."

The same idea having occurred to me, I applied the handle of the knife to my nose, and instantly detected the sickly sweet odor of musk.

"The question is," said the inspector, when the two articles had been tested by us all, "was it the knife that scented the handkerchief or the handkerchief that scented the knife?"

"You heard what the sergeant said," replied Thorndyke. "There was no scent on the handkerchief when the knife was wrapped in it. Do you know, inspector, this scent seems to me to offer a very curious suggestion. Consider the facts of the case: the distinct trail leading straight to Ellis, who is nevertheless found to be without a scratch or a spot of blood; the obvious inconsistencies in the case; and now this knife, apparently dropped with dried blood on it, and scented with musk. To me it suggests a carefully planned, coolly premeditated crime. The murderer knew about the General's bloodhounds, and made use of them as a blind. He left this knife, smeared with blood and tainted with musk, to furnish a scent. No doubt some object also scented with musk would be drawn over the ground to give the trail. It is only a suggestion, of course, but it is worth considering."

"But, sir," the inspector objected eagerly, "if the murderer had handled the knife, it would have scented him too."

"Exactly; so, as the man is evidently not a fool, we may assume that he did not handle it. He will have left it here in readiness, hidden in some place whence he could knock it down, say with a stick, without touching it."

"Perhaps in this very tree, sir," suggested the sergeant, pointing to the oak.

"No," said Thorndyke; "he would hardly have hidden in the tree where the knife had been. The hounds might have scented the place instead of following the trail at once. The most likely hiding-place for the knife would be nearest the spot where it was found."

He walked over to the stone that marked the spot, and, looking round, continued: "You see, that hornbeam is much the nearest, and its flat crown would be very convenient for the purpose — easily reached even by a short man, as he appears to be. Let us see if there are any traces of it. Perhaps you will give me a 'back up,' sergeant, as we haven't a ladder."

The sergeant assented with a faint grin, and, stooping beside the tree in an attitude suggesting the game of leap-frog, placed his hands firmly on his knees. Grasping a stout branch, Thorndyke swung himself up on the sergeant's broad back, whence he looked down into the crown of the tree. Then, parting the branches, he stepped on to the ledge and disappeared into the central hollow.

When he reappeared, he held in his hands two very singular objects: a pair of iron crucible-tongs and an artist's brush-case of black-japanned tin. The former article he handed down to me, but the brush-case he held carefully by its wire handle as he dropped to the ground.

"The significance of these things is, I think, obvious," he said. "The tongs were used to handle the knife with, and the case to carry it in, so that it should not scent the murderer's clothes or bag. It was very carefully planned."

"If that is so," said the inspector, "the inside of the case ought to smell of musk."

"No doubt," said Thorndyke. "But, before we open it, there is a rather important matter to be attended to. Will you give me the vitogen powder, Jervis?"

I opened the canvas-covered "research case," and took from it an object like a diminutive pepper-caster — an iodoform dredger, in fact — and handed it to him. Grasping the brush-case by its wire handle, he freely sprinkled the pale yellow powder from the dredger all around the pull-off lid, tapping the top with his knuckles to make the fine particles spread. Then he blew off the superfluous powder, and the two police officers gave a gasp of joy; for now, on the black background, there stood out plainly a number of finger-prints, so clear and distinct that the ridge-pattern could easily be made out.

"These will probably be his right hand," said Thorndyke. "Now for the left." He treated the body of the case in the same way, and the entire surface was spotted with oval

white impressions. "Now, Jervis," said he, "if you will put on a glove and pull off the lid, we can test the inside."

The lid came off without difficulty, and, as it separated with a hollow sound, a faint, musky odor exhaled from its interior.

"The remainder of the inquiry," said Thorndyke, "will be best conducted at the police station, where, also, we can photograph these finger-prints. That is where the value of the finger-prints comes in. If he is an old 'lag,' his prints will be at Scotland Yard."

"That's true, sir," said the inspector. "I suppose you want to see Ellis."

"I want to see that purse," replied Thorndyke. "That is probably the other end of the clue."

As soon as we arrived at the station, the inspector unlocked a safe and brought out a parcel. "These are Ellis' things," said he, as he opened it, "and that is the purse."

He handed Thorndyke a small pigskin pouch, which my colleague opened, and, having smelled of the inside, passed to me. The odor of musk was plainly perceptible.

"It has probably tainted the other contents of the parcel," said Thorndyke, sniffing at each article in turn; "but they all seem odorless to me, whereas the purse smells quite distinctly."

Having taken the finger-prints of the accused man, Ellis, and made several photographs of the strange finger-prints, we returned to town that evening. Thorndyke gave a few parting injunctions to the inspector.

"Remember," he said, "that the man must have washed his hands before he could appear in public. Search the banks of every pond, ditch, and stream in the neighborhood for foot-prints like those in the avenue, and, if you find any, search the bottom of the water thoroughly, for he is quite likely to have dropped the knife into the mud."

The photographs that we handed in at Scotland Yard that night enabled the experts to identify the finger-prints as those of Francis Dobbs, an escaped convict. The two photographs, profile and full-face, which were attached to his record, were sent down to Baysford, with a description of the man, and were in due course identified with a somewhat mysterious individual who passed by the name of Rufus Pembury, and who had lived in the neighborhood as a private gentleman for about two years. But Rufus Pembury was not to be found, either at his genteel house or elsewhere. All that was known was that, on the day after the murder, he had converted his entire "personalty" into "bearer securities," and had vanished from mortal ken. Nor has he ever been heard of to this day.